WHITMAN AND WOLFE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

By

WILLIAM C. DOSTER

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction 1

Chapter I. Subjectivity 1

Chapter II. Stylistic Affinities 9

Chapter III. Ideological Affinities 29

Conclusion 47

Bibliography 50

INTRODUCTION

There are many demonstrable parallels between the works of Thomas Wolfe and Walt Whitman, two of the many authors who have praised the Ideal America and counseled the Ideal America of the future. To discover these similarities and affinities, to illustrate them from the works of these two authors, and to arrive at some conclusions about these similarities will be the purpose of this thesis. In this study, the question of Whitman's influence upon Wolfe will not be considered. Much that is common to Wolfe's novels and Whitman's poems is not the peculiar property of either but rather comes from a common stream of thought and style flowing from earlier writers.

Many poets and critics of American literature have noted that there exist certain resemblances between Wolfe and Whitman. In a short article written just after the publication of Of Time and the River, Wolfe himself says:

> In addition, . . . there are scores of poems which I have read hundreds of times, and in the great lines of Donne, Shakespeare, Milton, Keats and Whitman, I have found a wealth that not only never dulls or tarnishes, but grows in beauty and wonder all the time.[1]

In an excellent study of Whitman and his works, Gay W. Allen writes:

> The fact that Whitman has no imitators or "disciples" (like Horace Traubel or Edward Carpenter) does not mean that his example of literary pioneering and his democratic ideas have

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1 "What a Writer Reads," The Bookbuyer, I (Christmas, 1935), 14.

> not permeated the heart and spirit of writers like Sherwood Anderson and Thomas Wolfe, to mention only two.[2]

In his introduction to The Face of a Nation, a book of poetical excerpts from Wolfe's first two novels and early short stories, John Hall Wheelock states:

> Thomas Wolfe was, first of all, a poet - a lyric poet of extraordinary intensity, with a sensitivity to word music, to rhythm and cadence, which can be likened only to that of Whitman, whose vision of America and of the American continent he shared.[3]

Another critic, Paul Hoffman, says in a review of Of Time and the River:

> As in his earlier book, /Wolfe/ has in this alternated in his structure between purely prosaic narrative . . . and flights of intense, personal Whitmanesque poetry. . . .[4]

Lewis Gannett points out the comparison more succinctly:

> Wolfe is an authentic descendant of Walt Whitman's spirit, perhaps the first full-throated voice to echo Whitman's notes.[5]

Anne Watkins in Taken at the Flood, an anthology of sections of novels and short stories which she considers the best writing of a particular author, says in the introduction to the selection from Wolfe:

> Throughout his work, Thomas Wolfe proves that there are no rules for writing of fiction which cannot be transcended. His contempt for dogmas of economy, for precepts against repetition often turn his prose to pure rhapsodic poetry. The Web and the Rock is done with the kind of im-

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2 Walt Whitman Handbook, p. 537.
3 Page v.
4 American Review, V (May, 1935), 191.
5 New York Herald Tribune, November 15, 1935, p. 15.

> pulse and power that carried Walt Whitman so far beyond the limits of traditional pattern.[6]

In a review of You Can't Go Home Again, Milton Rugoff comments:

> In /his weaknesses/ /Wolfe/ is in the tradition of Leaves of Grass and Moby Dick: his books, like these, reflect an expansiveness, an extravagance, an emotional gigantism, which has been called American.[7]

In his critical analysis of contemporary writers, Modern Fiction: A Study of Values, Herbert J. Muller declares:

> Wolfe is the poet of American life, as sensitive, lyrical, and robust as Whitman, and in his symbols still more concrete.[8]

Muller also suggests that Wolfe's novels may succeed in doing what "Walt Whitman attempted but only half succeeded in doing," that is, in making Americans more aware of their heritage and the glories of their own country.[9]

There are many similar quotations from critics and commentators, many of them casual and without too much critical significance, which might be cited. These, however, will suffice to show that there is a reasonable basis for a comparative analysis of the more prominent characteristics which these two writers have in common.

In this particular study, the comparison between Wolfe and Whitman will be based on their similar subjectivity, their stylistic affinities, and their ideological resemblances. Under these three broad classifica-

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6 Page 75.
7 Books, September 22, 1940, p. 5.
8 Page 411.
9 Ibid., p. 416.

tions, each of which will be discussed at some length in one of the following chapters, the likeness of Wolfe to Whitman may most easily be demonstrated, although there are other possible bases of comparison.[10]

10 The edition of Leaves of Grass from which the quotations in the body of this thesis are taken is the Inclusive Edition, edited by Emory Holloway, and published in 1938. The various Whitman prose works and letters and the novels of Thomas Wolfe quoted from are the standard editions or reprints as noted in the Bibliography.

CHAPTER I

Subjectivity

> I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
> And what I assume you shall assume,
> For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.[1]
> — Walt Whitman

> My book was what is often referred to as an autobiographical novel.[2]
> — Thomas Wolfe

Both Thomas Wolfe and Walt Whitman wrote intensely subjective books. Whitman declares in "Song of Myself" that it is he who is the central character in his poems, that it is he who is the ideal poet of America, and that it is he who forms the nucleus for a future race of American democrats. In like manner, in his Introduction to Look Homeward, Angel, Wolfe writes:

> This is a first book, and in it the author has written of experience which is now far and lost, but which was once part of the fabric of his life. If any reader, therefore, should say that the book is "autobiographical," the writer has no answer for him: it seems to him that all serious work in fiction is autobiographical . . . .

Similar statements occur again and again in The Story of a Novel, which might be considered as Wolfe's defense of his works and the amount of his own personality which he projected into them; for example:

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1 Leaves of Grass, p. 24.

2 "The Story of a Novel," The Portable Thomas Wolfe, ed. by M. Geismar, p. 572. This volume is, hereafter, referred to as "The Story of a Novel."

> I have written my book, more or less, directly from the experience of my own life, and furthermore, I now think that I may have written it with a certain naked intensity which is likely to characterize the earliest work of a young writer.[3]

Wolfe's use of so many incidents and characters from his early life in Asheville had a surprising effect upon him eventually; the publication of Look Homeward, Angel was greeted with violent outbursts of disapprobation from a large group of the citizens of his home town, a response which bewildered and astonished Wolfe almost beyond his own belief.[4] Even the names of his characters were drawn directly from those appearing in his own family. Wolfe's father, W. O. Wolfe, became W. O. Gant; his mother, Julia Elizabeth Wolfe, became Eliza Gant; and his brothers, Ben and Grover, became Ben and Grover Gant.[5] There are many other examples of this process of naming characters for those who actually existed in Wolfe's family or in his home city.

Wolfe, then, admitted this subjectivity, for he knew that his senses were keenly perceptive and his memory retentive of all he had experienced, even the most minute or insignificant event:

> The quality of memory is characterized, I believe, in a more than ordinary degree by the intensity of its sense impressions, its power to evoke and bring back the odors, sounds, colors, shapes, and feel of things with concrete vividness.[6]

This statement is followed by a catalogue of images which describe in a phrase or sentence each many incidents which he had remembered

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3 Ibid., pp. 570-571
4 Ibid.
5 H. Norwood, The Marble Man's Wife: Thomas Wolfe's Mother, pp.4-5.
6 "The Story of a Novel," p. 578.

for years and some of which he had used in his novels.

Whitman likewise wrote from his own experience to portray the sights, sounds, smells, and activities of the American scene. Emory Holloway says:

> The ideal man he sang was — had to be — himself. He accepted this necessity, though he never seems to have fully realized its limitations. "I know perfectly well my road is different. Most of the great poets are impersonal; I am personal. They portray characters, events, passions, but never mention themselves. In my poems, all revolves around, concentrates in, radiates from myself. I have but one central figure, the general human personality typified in myself."[7]

In another place, Holloway writes:

> The material out of which dream images are fashioned is, of course, all supplied by experience, personal or imaginative. In Whitman's poems, he refers to the events of his dream as "past-readings" or records of what he had seen, "whether in the body or out of the body." Some passages we can recognize as his actual experience . . . .[8]

Henry Seidel Canby emphasizes this point, saying that the poem is "packed full" of one man, and that man is Walt Whitman.[9] Gay W. Allen, referring to the lines quoted from Whitman at the beginning of this chapter, declares:

> Leaves of Grass is one of the most personal, and in many ways the most naively frank, collections of poetry ever written.[10]

In a later stanza echoing the first lines of Leaves of Grass, "So Long," Whitman writes:

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7 Whitman: An Interpretation in Narrative, p. 120. The enclosed quotation is from Whitman, Holloway says, but the exact source is not given.

8 Ibid., p. 123.

9 Walt Whitman: An American, p. 3.

10 Walt Whitman Handbook, p. 3.

> Camerado, this is no book,
> Who touches this touches a man,
> (Is it night? are we here together alone?)
> It is I you hold and who holds you,
> I spring from the pages into your arms - decease calls me forth.[11]

In his attempt to typify the general human personality in himself, or to use another phrase, to universalize his experiences to make them applicable to all men, Whitman uses the generic "I" throughout Leaves of Grass and the prose works, making of himself a microcosm of all that man has been, all that man is, and all that man hopes to be. There is also no doubt that Whitman shared with Wolfe an extraordinarily intense recollection. Canby says:

> These early fifties are the end of the formative period of Whitman's life — the years when, as he said, he absorbed the soul and mind and behavior of the hundreds of thousands of Americans in the cities of New York Bay, to which what he drew from the west and New Orleans was added.[12]

As a result of Whitman's use of even insignificant experiences, which is likewise characteristic of Wolfe, Whitman presents in many of his poems pictures which could have come only from a person of rare perception:

> These I singing in spring collect for lovers,
> (For who but I should understand lovers and all their sorrow and joy?
> And who but I should be the poet of comrades?)
> Collecting I traverse the garden of the world, but soon I pass the gates,
> Now along the pond-side, now wading a little, fearing not the wet,
> Now by the post-and-rail fences where the old stones thrown there, pick'd from the fields, have accumulated,

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11 Leaves of Grass, p. 418.
12 Canby, op. cit., p. 82.

(Wild flowers and vines and weeds come up through the
stones and partly cover them, beyond these I pass,)
Far, far in the forest, or sauntering later in summer,
before I think where I go,
Solitary, smelling the earthy smell, stopping now and
then in the silence,
. . .
Here, lilac, with a branch of pine,
Here, out of my pocket, some moss which I pull'd off a live-
oak in Florida as it hung trailing down,
Here, some pinks and laurel leaves, and a handful of sage,
. . .[13]

Moreover, it is obvious that Whitman throughout his poems and Wolfe, particularly in The Web and the Rock and You Can't Go Home Again, were attempting to universalize their own magnificent stories and ideas, as has already been stated. In an "Author's Note" at the beginning of The Web and the Rock, Wolfe discloses:

> This novel is about one man's discovery of life and of the world — discovery not in a sudden and explosive sense as when "a new planet swims into his ken," but discovery through a process of finding out as a man has to find out, through error and through trial, through fantasy and illusion, through falsehood and his own foolishness, through being mistaken and wrong and an idiot and egotistical and aspiring and hopeful and believing and confused, and pretty much what every one of us is, and goes through, and finds out, and becomes.
>
> I hope the protagonist will illustrate in his own experience every one of us . . . .

Here, however, an obvious contrast in degree is apparent. Whitman explicitly identified himself with everyone everywhere in America — for instance, in such sections of Leaves of Grass as "A Song for Occupations," "Salute Au Monde," "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," "Kosmos,"

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13 Leaves of Grass, p. 99.

and other of the all-encompassing catalogues of individuals and occupations with which he felt himself allied through personal experience and sympathy. In Wolfe's novels, however, the identification of the author and the central character with everyone everywhere is not as clear; Wolfe presents his story and says that he hopes that the reader will in some measure obtain the lesson of the future greatness of America which is there on the pages. On the other hand, Whitman iterates the doctrine again and again that his lessons must be learned completely as the only source of inspiration and guidance to the great glory of democracy which is sure to come in this country.

Another point of contrast is apparent, too, and lies in Wolfe's overpowering impulse to write, because, perhaps, he had the desire to relate in infinite detail his own experiences in the hope that his readers would be spared the same search for stability by finding it in the same fact — the American way of life — from which Wolfe eventually found soul-satisfaction:

> I don't know how I became a writer, but I think it was because of a certain force in me that had to write and that finally burst through and found a channel . . . finally in the autumn of 1926, how, why, or in what manner I have never been able to determine, but probably because the force in me at length sought out its channel, I began to write my first book in London.[14]

Perhaps the questions in this passage may be answered by saying that the impulse to write was a subconscious urge to rid his soul of his

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14 "The Story of a Novel," p. 564.

own doubts about life and the purposes of living. Some person seeking a way through the maze of existence might read the book, discover Wolfe's solution to the questions, and find his own way. This apparent purpose is not clear until the end of You Can't Go Home Again, but the plan of the "book" is clear once the conclusion has been reached.

Thus, it has been shown that the works of Wolfe and Whitman are related by their common subjectivity, although Whitman relied more upon the sights, sounds, and other manifestations of the sensual world while Wolfe was actually using characters and events taken directly from his life and translating them into his plot almost literally. Looking backward over the works of each, one feels awed, overpowered, and frequently embarrassed by the revelations each made in his books; but there is no denying their power and driving search for the truth as they saw it and the means of deliverence from the morass of fears and doubts into which both felt America had fallen. It is perhaps significant that two such artists -- one the product of Brooklyn in the last century, newspaper editor, visitor of Washington hospitals during the Civil War, and a contemporary of the infamous "robber-barons" of the nineteenth century; the other born in the South from which he fled, an incessant traveler, and university teacher -- should arrive at approximately the same conclusion about American life and adopt almost the same methods to combat current American ailments as they saw them. Whitman proclaimed to the nation that he was the prophet

of the future, perfect American democracy; and Wolfe used his own experience of being lost and finding himself to demonstrate to others that they, too, could resolve their fears.

CHAPTER II

Stylistic Affinities

> The words of my book nothing, the drift of it everything,
> A book separate, not link'd with the rest nor felt by the intellect,
> But you ye untold latencies will thrill to every page.[1]
> — Walt Whitman

> I cannot really say the book was written. It was something that took hold of me and possessed me, and before I was done with it — that is, before I finally emerged with the first completed part — it seemed to me that it had done with me.[2]
> — Thomas Wolfe

There are various stylistic affinities between Walt Whitman and Thomas Wolfe, which can readily be demonstrated by a comparison of Leaves of Grass and the novels which Wolfe wrote. It will be the purpose of this chapter to point out these affinities, disregarding, however, any claim that Wolfe was influenced by the style of Whitman.

In the Preface to the 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass, Whitman says:

> For expressing the multiplicity of America the expression of the American poet is to be transcendent and new. It is to be indirect and not direct or descriptive or epic. Its quality goes through these to much more.[3]

From this, one might assume that Whitman was attempting to produce an entirely new mode of expression or poetic form, but G. W. Allen in his Walt Whitman Handbook says that this is not entirely true:

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1 Leaves of Grass, p. 11.
2 "The Story of a Novel," The Portable Thomas Wolfe, ed. by M. Geismar, p. 581.
3 Leaves of Grass, p. 491.

> But whatever the sources of Whitman's verse technique, the style of the King James Version of the Bible is generally agreed to provide convenient analogies for the prosodic analysis of Leaves of Grass.[4]

Other critics have also noted that parallelism and reiteration, two poetic devices in the King James Version, seem to be the basic rhythmical principles in Leaves of Grass. E. C. Ross does not mention Allen's analogy above but describes Whitman's versification in this manner:

> Whitman's verse - with the exception that it is not metered - is farther removed from prose than is traditional verse itself, for the reason that the traditional verse is, like prose, composed in sentences, whereas Whitman's verse is composed in lines . . . A run-on line is rare in Whitman - so rare that it may be considered a "slip." The law of his structure is that the unit of sense is the measure of the line.[5] The lines in sense are end-stopped. Whitman employed everywhere a system of punctuation to indicate his structure. Look down any page of Leaves of Grass, and you will find almost every line ending in a comma; you will find a period at the end of a group of lines or a whole poem. Syntactically, there may be many sentences in the groups of the whole poem, there may be two or three sentences in one line. But Whitman was composing by lines, not by sentences, and he punctuated accordingly.[6]

In view of Allen's analogy between the style of the Bible and that of Whitman, it is interesting to note Wolfe's comment on the Bible in his introspective essay "God's Lonely Man":

> The most tragic, sublime, and beautiful expression of human loneliness which I have ever read is the Book of Job; the grandest and most philosophical, Ecclesiastes . . . . For the Book of Job, far from being dreary, gray, and dismal, is woven entire more than any piece of writing

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4 Page 389.
5 Ross's italics.
6 "Whitman's Verse," MLN, XLV (June, 1930), 363-364.

> I can recall, from the sensuous, flashing, infinitely various and gloriously palpable material of great poetry; and it wears at the heart of its tremendous chant of everlasting sorrow the exulting song of everlasting joy.[7]

Wolfe then quotes the following extract from Job,[8] a good example of the parallelism which Wolfe himself used so extensively in his own novels:

> Hast thou given the horse strength? hast thou clothed his neck with thunder?
> Canst thou make him afraid as a grasshopper? The glory of his nostrils is terrible.
> He paweth in the valley, and rejoiceth in his strength; he goeth on to meet the armed me.
> He mocketh at fear, and is not afrighted; neither turneth he back from the sword.
> The quiver rattleth against him, the glittering spear and the shield.
> He swalloweth the ground with fierceness and rage;neither believeth he that is the sound of the trumpet.
> He saith among the trumpets, Ha, ha; and he smelleth the battle afar off, the thunder of the captains, and the shouting.[9]

This arrangement of the lines from Job by Wolfe shows that he recognized the parallel structure, and it is quite possible that the same motivation which guided the writer of Job guided Wolfe, consciously or unconsciously. Almost all the lines are balanced in the quotation above, an illustration of a technique Whitman used frequently in developing his own prosodic pattern.

Sculley Bradley finds additional metrical devices in Whitman besides parallelism and reiteration:

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7 The Hills Beyond, pp. 191-192.
8 Job 39.19-25.
9 The Hills Beyond, pp. 193.

> For in the majority of the lines of Whitman, which are not brought into equivalence by repetition of substance and phrases, there is still the equivalence of rhythm regulated by a periodicity of stress so uniformly measured as to constitute a true "meter." It is a device capable of infinite subtlety, and we must understand it fully in order to appreciate the extent ot the poet's craftmanship.[10]

In explanation of his contention, Mr. Bradley uses what he calls a "hovering accent," as in the poem "Tears," which he scans:

```
    x       x       x
3  Tears!  tears!  tears!
            x       x       x
3  In the night, in solitude, tears,
                x       x       x       x       x
5  On the white shore dripping, dripping, sucked in by the sand,
    x       x   x       x-      x
5  Tears, not a star shining, all dark and desolate,
        x           x           x
3  Moist tears from the eyes of a muffled head.

    x           x           x       x       x
5  O who is that ghost? that form in the dark, with tears?
        x       x           x       x       x       x
6  What shapeless lump is that, bent, crouched there on the sand?
    x           x           x       x       x
5  Streaming tears, sobbing tears, throes, choked with wild cries;

    x       x       x       x           x
6  O storm, embodied, rising, careering with swift steps along the
            x
        beach!
    x       x       x           x       x
6  O wild and dismal night storm, with wind - O belching and
            x
        desperate!
    x       x       x       x       x       x
8  O shade so sedate and decorous by day, with calm countenance
            x       x
        and regulated pace,
        x       x       x       x       x
7  But away at night as you fly, none looking - O then the un-
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10 "The Fundamental Metrical Principle in Whitman's Poetry," AL, X (January, 1939), 447.

x x
loosened ocean
x x x
3 Of tears! tears! tears![11]

To clarify his indicated markings, Bradley says:

> I hope it is clear that this poem is like a large wave or breaker with three crests. The shape of the entire poem may be interpreted as pyramidal, beginning with a three-stress line, rising to two pinnacles of six and eight stresses, and subsiding again to three stresses in the last line. Similarly, the rhythmic shape of each of the constituent "crests" is pyramidal. The first section of five lines, in which the rain in the night is likened to tears, announces the pyramid in the swell and fall through lines of 3, 3, 5, 5, and 3 stress; in the second, in which the spirit of the world broods over the night, the initial impulse is paralleled more grandly in the succession of 5, 6, and 5 stress; in the final section, in which the identity of an individual weeper merges with the cosmic woe of nature itself, the full rhythmic diapason is unloosed in the great cloudhead, or crest, of 6, 6, 8, 7 and 3 stresses . . . When we find similar perfection in poem after poem, we must conclude that it is the result of consistent artistic purpose.[12]

Using this system of scansion, I shall show how two representative passages from Wolfe's novels follow this same scheme.

Considering comparable free verse patterns in Wolfe and Whitman in addition to the system of scansion outlined above, it is apparent that "Tears" is a perfect example of the "envelope." The first line makes a statement, the succeeding lines amplify or apply the statement to another or similar set of circumstances, and the last line repeats identically the words of the first. An example of the same device from Wolfe is:

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11 Ibid., p. 449.
12 Ibid., pp. 449-450.

x x x x
4 A stone, a leaf, an unfound door;
x x x
3 Of a stone, a leaf, a door.

x x x x
4 Naked and alone we came into exile.
x x x x x
5 In her dark womb we did not know our mother's face;
x x x x
8 From the prison of her flesh have we come into the inspeakable
x x x x
and incommunicable prison of this earth.

x x x x
4 Which of us has known his brother?
x x x x x
5 Which of us has looked into his father's heart?
x x x x x x
7 Which of us has not remained forever prison-pent?
x x x x x
5 Which of us is not forever a stranger and alone?
x x x x
¶→4 O waste of loss, in the hot mazes, lost,
x x x x x x x
6 Among bright stars on this most weary unbright cinder, lost!

x x x x x x
6 Remembering speechlessly we seek the great forgotten language,
x x x
3 A lost lane-end into heaven,
x x x x
4 A stone, a leaf, an unfound door.[13]

This selection breaks up almost automatically into five free verse stanzas, corresponding exactly with Wolfe's paragraphs, and it is evident that the same pyramidal structure which Bradley discovered in a number of Whitman's poems is found here. The second, third and fourth stanzas rise to natural climaxes, the second in a line of

13 Look Homeward, Angel, front matter. The arrangement of the lines in this and all other passages from Wolfe is my own.

eight stresses, the third in a seven-stress line, and the fourth in a line of six stresses. The last stanza, the climax of the whole section, descends through lines of six, three, to the last line of four stresses; and the whole "poem," which has risen to a magnificent pinnacle in the fourth stanza, dies away on the same quiet note with which it began, almost as the still ebbing of a wave after breaking - the same figure which Bradley uses to describe the gentle pathos of the last line of "Tears."

Another of Wolfe's "envelopes" may be arranged in almost exactly the same way:

x x x x
4 This is the way things are:
x x x x x
5 Here is the grass, so green, so sweet and delicate,
x x x
3 But with some brown rubble in it.
x x x x x
5 There are the houses all along the street,
x x x x x x
7 The concrete blocks of walls, somehow so dreary, ugly yet
x
familiar,
x x x
3 The lawns, the hedges, and the gables,
x x x x x
10 The backyards with their accidental structures of so many
x x x x x
little and familiar things as hen-houses, barns,
x x x
3 All common and familiar as my breath,
x x x x
4 All accidental as the strings of blind chance
x x x x
4 Yet all somehow foreordered as a destiny;
x x x x x x
6 The way they are, because they are the way they are.[14]

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14 The Web and the Rock, p. 18. The majority of Wolfe's poetic passages cannot be scanned by the indicated method, for many of the lines, while rhapsodic, will not fit Bradley's scheme. The two pas-

In this selection there is no climax, no pinnacle, for it is rather a description of simple, everyday things, proving that Wolfe did not need to work himself into a demoniac frenzy with some philosophic profundity or comment upon his characters or their situations at the moment to produce poetic flights. It should be pointed out here in connection with these lines, moreover, that they contain another example of the literary technique common to both Wolfe and Whitman - the catalogue, which will be discussed in greater detail below.

Whitman's catalogues, or the piling upon one another of myriad sense experiences or facts or examples or illustrations of his theme, are famous and appear in virtually each one of the longer poems of Leaves of Grass. "The Song of the Broad-Axe" is a catalogue from beginning to end:

> The log at the wood-pile, the axe supported by it,
> The sylvan hut, the vine over the doorway, the space clear'd for a garden,
> The irregular tapping of rain down on the leaves after the storm is lull'd,
> The wailing and moaning at intervals, the thought of the sea,
> The thought of ships struck in the storm and put on their beam ends, and the cutting away of masts,
> The sentiment of the huge timbers of old-fashion'd houses and barns,
> The remember'd print or narrative, to voyage at a venture of men, families, goods,
> The disembarkation, the founding of a new city,
> The voyage of those who sought a New England and found it, the outset anywhere,
> The settlements of the Arkansas, Colorado, Ottawa, Willamette,
> The slow progress, the scant fare, the axe, rifle, saddle-bags;
> . . .

---

sages quoted, however, are representative of those which do show evidence of having a discernible "regular" metrical pattern.

The butcher in the slaughter-house, the hands aboard schooners
and sloops, the raftsman, the pioneer,
Lumbermen in their winter camps, daybreak in the woods,
stripes of snow on the limbs of trees, the occasional
snapping,
The glad clear sound of one's own voice, the merry song, the
natural life of the woods, the strong day's work,
The blazing fire at night, the sweet taste of supper, the
talk, the bed of hemlock-boughs and the bear-skin;[15]

This same catalogue of persons and places and experiences, each line of which would have served another poet as subject matter for a whole poem, continues for several hundred lines, pounding and pounding again Whitman's photo-montage effect of the American scene. Another poem, almost exclusively a catalogue of personalities, is "Salut au Monde!" the third section of which reads:

What do you hear Walt Whitman?

I hear the workman singing and the farmer's wife singing,
I hear in the distance the sounds of children and of animals
early in the day,
I hear emulous shouts of Australians pursuing the wild horses,
I hear the Spanish dance with castanets in chestnut shade, to
the rebeck and guitar,
I hear continual echoes from the Thames,
I hear fierce French liberty songs,
I hear of the Italian boat-sculler the musical recitative of
old poems,
I hear the locusts in Syria as they strike the grain and grass
with the showers of their terrible clouds,
I hear the Coptic refrain toward sundown, pensively falling
on the breast of the black venerable vast mother of the
Nile,
I hear the chirp of the Mexican muleteer, and the bells of the
mule,
I hear the Arab muezzin calling from the top of the mosque,
I hear the Christian priests at the altars of their churches,
I hear the responsive bass and soprano,
I hear the cry of the Cossack, and the sailor's voice putting
to sea at Obotsk,

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15 Leaves of Grass, p. 157.

I hear the wheeze of the slave-coffle as the slaves march
on, as the husky gangs pass on by twos and threes,
fastn'd together with wrist-chains and ankle-chains,
I hear the Hebrew reading his records and psalms,
I hear the rhythmic myths of the Greeks, and strong legends
of the Romans,
I hear the tale of the divine life and the bloody death of
the beautiful God the Christ,
I hear the Hindoo teaching his favorite pupil the loves, wars,
adages, transmitted safely to this day from poets who
wrote three thousand years ago.[16]

The repetition of the initial "I hear" builds up a rhythmic pattern when the poem is read aloud, much more forcefully than blank verse in which sentences are written in lines of five iambs each.

A description of America from Of Time and the River has much the same cumulative effect:

America has a thousand lights and weathers and we walk the
streets,
We walk the streets forever,
We walk the streets of life alone.
It is the place of the howling winds,
The hurrying of the leaves in old October,
The hard clean falling to the earth of acorns,
The place of the storm-tossed moaning of the wintry mountainside,
Where the young men cry out in their throats and feel the savage
vigor;
The place also where the trains cross rivers.

It is a fabulous country, the only fabulous country;
It is the one place where miracles not only happen, but where
they happen all the time.

It is the place of exultancy and strong joy,
The place of the darkened brooding air, the smell of snow;
It is the place of all the fierce, the bitten colors in
October, when all the wild, sweet woods flame up;
It is also the place of the cider press and the last brown coz-
ings of the York Imperials.

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16 Ibid., p. 115.

It is the place of the lovely girls with good jobs and husky voices, who will buy a round of drinks;
It is the place where the women with fine legs and silken underwear lie in the pullman berth below you,
It is the place of the dark-green snore of the pullman cars, and the voices of night-time in Virginia.

It is the place where great boats are baying at the harbor's mouth, where great ships are putting out to sea;
It is the place where great boats are blowing in the gulf at night,
And where the river, the dark and secret river, full of strange time, is forever flowing by us to the sea.[17]

This catalogue continues for more than five pages enumerating all the items with which Wolfe attempted to convey a phantasmagoric picture of the United States. This particular one ends with almost the same words as the beginning, forming another example of the "envelope pattern" of free verse development:

And always America is the place of the deathless and enraptured moments,
The eye that looked, the mouth that smiled and vanished, and the word;
The stone, the leaf, the door we never found and have never forgotten.

And these are the things that we remember of America,
For we have known her thousand lights and weathers,
And we walk the streets,
We walk the streets forever,
We walk the streets of life alone.[18]

From the same novel, the magnificent catalogue of similes concerning the Hudson River is an example of Wolfe's striving for an overpowering sensual effect through the piling of one descriptive epithet upon another:

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17 Pages 155-156.
18 Ibid., p. 160.

The Hudson River joins the harbor.
And then the harbor joins the sea.
Always the rivers run.

The Hudson River drinks from out the inland slowly;
It is like vats that well with purple and rich wine.
The Hudson River is like purple depths of evening;
It is like the flames of color on the Palisades, elves' echoes, and old Dutch and Hallowe'en.
It is like the Phantom Horseman, the tossed boughs, and the demented winds,
And it is like the headed cider and great fires of the Dutchmen in the winter time.

The Hudson River is like old October and tawny Indians in their camping places long ago;
It is like long pipes and old tobacco;
It is like cool depths and opulence;
It is like the shimmer of liquid green on summer days.

The Hudson River takes the thunder of fast trains and throws a handful of lost echoes to the hills.
It is like the calls of lost men in the mountains;
And it is like the country boy who is coming to city with a feeling of glory in his guts.
It is like the green plush smell of the Pullman cars and snowy linen;
It is like the kid in upper four and the good-looking woman down below who stirs her lovely legs slowly in starched sheets;
It is the magic river.
It is like coming to the city to make money, to find glory, fame and love, and a life more fortunate and happy than any we have ever known.
It is like the Knickerbockers and early autumn.
It is like the Rich Folks, and the River People, the Vanderbilts, the Astors, and the Roosevelts;
It is like Robert W. Chambers and the Society Folks;

. . .

And above all else, the Hudson River was like the light -
Oh, more than anything it was the light,
The light, the tone, the texture of the magic light in which he had seen the city as a child, that made the Hudson River wonderful.[19]

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19 Ibid., p. 506.

There follows this selection another catalogue-like description of "the light," showing how Wolfe interwove his themes, as Bradley says of Whitman "in a manner comparable to that of great symphonic music."[20] A brief section of this marvelous description, which in my opinion marks one of the high points of Wolfe's poetic writing, follows:

> The light was golden, deep and full with all rich golden
> lights of harvest;
> The light was golden like the flesh of women, lavish as their
> limbs, true, depthless,
> Tender as their glorious eyes, fine-spun and maddening as
> their hair.
> As unutterable with desire as their fragrant nests of spicery,
> their deep melon-heavy breasts.
> The light was golden like a golden morning light that shines
> through ancient glass into a room of old dark brown.
> The light was brown, dark lavish brown hued with rich lights
> of gold;
> The light was rich brown shot with gold like the sultry and
> exultant fragrance of ground coffee;
> The light was lavish brown like old stone houses gulched in
> morning on a city street,
> Brown like exultant breakfast smells that come from basement
> areas in the brownstone houses where the rich men lived;
> The light was blue, steep frontal blue, like morning underneath
> the frontal cliff of buildings;
> The light was vertical cool blue hazed with thin morning mist;
> The light was blue, cold flowing harbor blue of clean cool
> waters with a dancing morning gold, fresh, half-rotten
> with the musty river stench,
> Blue with the blue-black of the morning gulch and canyon of the
> city,
> Blue-black with cool morning shadow as the ferry, packed with
> its thousand small white staring faces turned one way,
> drove bluntly toward the rusty weathered ships.
>
> The light was amber brown in vast dark chambers shuttered from
> young light where in great walnut beds the glorious women
> stirred in sensual warmth their lavish limbs.
> The light was brown-gold, like ground coffee, on merchants and
> walnut houses where they lived,

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20 Bradley, op. cit., p. 455.

Brown-gold like old brick buildings grimed with money and the
smell of trade;
Brown-gold like morning on great gleaming bars of smart
mahogany, the fresh wet beer-wash, lemon-rind, and the
smell of angustora bitters.
Then full-golden in the evenings in the theaters,
Shining with full golden warmth and body on full golden figures
of the women, on fat, red plush, and on rich, faded, slight-
ly stale smell.
And on the gilt sheaves and cupids and cornucopias,
On the fleshly, potent, softly-golden smell of all the people;
And in great restaurants the light was brighter gold,
But full and round like warm onyx columns, smooth warmly tinted
marble,
Old wine in dark rounded age-encrusted bottles, and the great
blonde figures of naked women on rose clouded ceilings.
Then the light was full and rich, brown-golden like great
fields in autumn;
It was full swelling golden light like mown fields, bronze-red,
picketed with fat rusty golden sheaves of corn, and governed
by huge barns of red and the mellow winey fragrance of the
apples.[21]

This passage could really be called a symphony of color, because Wolfe begins with a number of "golden" similes, shades off into brown and "brown shot with gold," then changes rather abruptly to blue and blue-black, shifts again to brown and brown-gold, and finally ends on a long simile of gold. The colors flow through the selection with kaleidoscopic effect, as succeeding lines pick up and amplify the description of preceding lines and one simile flows from the one before and melts away into the one following until a rich tapestry effect, obtained also by the repetition of such words as "lavish," "rich," "exultant," and "full," is complete.

Section 21 of "Song of Myself" illustrates something of the same tapestry-like technique:

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21 Of Time and the River, pp. 507-508.

I am he who walks with the tender and growing night,
I call to the earth and sea half-held by the night.

Press close bare-bosom'd night - press close magnetic nourishing night!
Night of south winds - night of the large few stars!
Still nodding night - mad naked summer night.

Smile O voluptuous cool-breath'd earth!
Earth of the slumbering and liquid trees!
Earth of the departed sunset - earth of the mountains misty-topt!
Earth of the vitreous pour of the full moon just tinged with blue!
Earth of shone and dark mottling the tide of the river!
Earth of the limpid gray of clouds brighter and clearer for my sake!
Far-swooping earth - rich apple-blossom'd earth!
Smile, for your lover comes.

Prodigal, you have given me love - therefore I to you give love!
O unspeakable passionate love![22]

Here Whitman is describing night and earth primarily in terms of color, and although the symphonic theme is not as intricate as in the Wolfe passage, the gradations between the colors and the items described are still apparent, and the similes themselves add up to the overpowering climax of the last two lines of the poem. A similar selection is "A Prairie Sunset:"

Shot gold, maroon and violet, dazzling silver, emerald, fawn,
The earth's whole amplitude and Nature's multiform power consign'd for once to colors;
The light, the general air possess'd by them - colors till now unknown,
No limit, confine - not the Western sky alone - the high meridian - North, South, all,
Pure luminous color fighting the silent shadows to the last.[23]

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22 Leaves of Grass, p. 41.
23 Ibid., p. 438.

In this poem Whitman's pallette more nearly approaches that of Wolfe in the "gold" passage above.

Whitman made rather limited use of another rhythmic device - the refrain - perhaps, as Allen says, because it is too much like conventional rhyming to be harmonious with the whole purpose of Leaves of Grass.[24] There are, however, one or two examples of this stylistic device, of which a portion of Section 24 of "Song of Myself" is an illustration:

> If I worship one thing more than another it shall be the spread
> of my own body or any part of it,
> Translucent mould of me it shall be you!
> Shaded ledges and rests it shall be you!
> Firm masculine colter it shall be you!
> Whatever goes to the tilth of me it shall be you!
> You my rich blood! your milky stream pale strippings of my life!
> Breast that presses against other breasts it shall be you!
> My brain it shall be your occult convolutions!
> Root of wash'd sweet-flag! timorous pond-snipe! nest of guarded
> duplicate eggs! it shall be you!
> Mix'd tusseled hay of head, beard, brawn, it shall be you!
> Sun so generous it shall be you!
> Vapors lighting and shading my face it shall be you.
> Winds whose soft-tickling genitals rub against me it shall be
> you!
> Broad muscular fields, branches of live oak, loving lounger in
> my winding paths, it shall be you!
> Hands I have taken, face I have kiss'd, mortal I have ever
> touch'd, it shall be you![25]

Wolfe makes frequent use of the refrain; for instance, "a stone, a leaf, a door", or variations on the same phrase, recurs as a chorus throughout Look Homeward, Angel and Of Time and the River in almost all of the poetic passages and in some of the straight narration and

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24 Allen, op. cit., p. 405.
25 Leaves of Grass., p. 45.

description. In the following excerpt from the former book, it is interesting to note the repetition of "we shall not come again" from Eugene's chant for the dead Ben:

We shall not come again.
We never shall come back again.
But over us all, over us all, over us all is - something.

Wind pressed the boughs;
The withered leaves were shaking.
It was October, but some leaves were shaking.

A light swings over the hill.
(We shall not come again.)
And over the town a star.
(Over us all, over us all that shall not come again.)
And over the day the dark.
But over the darkness - what?

We shall not come again.
We never shall come back again.

Over the dawn a lark.
(That shall never come again.)
And wind and music far.
O Lost!
(It shall not come again.)
And over your mouth the earth.
O ghost!
But over the darkness - what?

Wind pressed the boughs;
The withered leaves were quaking.

We shall not come back again.
We never shall come back again.
It was October, but we never shall come back again.

When will they come again?
When will they come again?

The laurel, the lizard, and the stone will come no more.
The women weeping at the gate have gone and will not come again.
The pain and pride and death will pass, and the star and the cry
of the lark will pass, and will not come again.
And we shall pass, and shall not come again.

What things will come again?
O spring, the cruelest and fairest of seasons, will come again.
And the strange and buried men will come again,
In flower and leaf the strange and buried men will come again,
And death and dust will never come again, for death and dust
will die.
And Ben will come again,
He will not die again,
In flower and leaf, in wind and music far,
He will come back again.

O lost, and by the wind grieved,
Ghost, come back again.[25]

From the latter novel, there is another example of this technique, in combination with another of Wolfe's all-inclusive catalogues:

Play us a tune on an unbroken spinet,
And let the bells ring, let the bells ring!
Play music now: play us a tune on an unbroken spinet.
Do not make echoes of forgotten time,
Do not strike music from old broken keys,
Do not make ghosts with faded tinklings in the yellowed board;
But play us a tune on an unbroken spinet,
Play lively music when the instrument was new,
Let us see Mozart playing in the parlor,
And let us hear the sound of ladies' voices.

But more than that:
Waken the turmoil of forgotten streets, let us hear their
sounds again unmuted, and unchanged by time,
Throw the light of Wednesday morning on the Third Crusade,
And let us see Athens on an average day.
Let us hear the sound of the voices of the Greeks, and observe
closely if they were all wise and beautiful at ten o'clock
in the morning;
Let us see if their limbs were all perfect, and their gestures
grave and stately,
Also let us smell their food and observe them eating,
And hear, if only once, the sound of a wheel in a street,
The texture of just four forgotten moments.

Give us the sounds of Egypt on a certain day;
Let us hear the voice of King Menkaura and some of the words of
the lady Sennuwy;

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25 Look Homeward, Angel, pp. 582-583.

Also the voices of the cotton-farmers.
Let us hear the vast and casual sound of life, in these old peoples:
Their greetings in the street, the voices of the housewives and merchants.
And let us hear the laughter of a woman in the sixteenth century.

The cry of the wolfe would always be the same;
The sound of the wheel will always be the same;
And the hoof of the horse on the roads of every time will be the same.
But play us a tune on an unbroken spinet;
And let us hear the voices of knights at dinner;
The cry of a man to his dog, and the barking of the dog;
The call of the plow-driver to his horse, and the sound of the horse;
The noise of the hunt, and the sound of flowing water, will always be the same.[27]

This catalogue with the refrain "Play us a tune on an unbroken spinet" continues for several pages, representing again, perhaps, Wolfe's desire to have contact with all ages and periods of time just as Whitman used his "expanding ego" to embrace all the facets and multifarious activities of America and the world.

There are many other passages from both Wolfe and Whitman which might be cited to show the kindred technique which these two authors used to express their hopes, aspirations, and dreams of the American future. I have shown how both of them used a style analagous to that of the King James Version of the Bible, that examples from the works of each may be scanned using a method suggested by Sculley Bradley, that both used a parallel structure in numerous passages, and that various verse forms were discernible in the works of both men, even though the outward forms of their work are completely different. It

27 Of Time and the River, p. 853.

would be unfair to both writers to say that one wrote better or was more a master of his form than the other, because Whitman was obviously attempting a new direction in poetry just as many avant-garde writers are doing today, and Wolfe was writing a novel in four volumes, each adding a chapter to the story of Eugene Gant-George Webber-Thomas Wolfe.

Perhaps a thorough rendering of many of Wolfe's lines into free verse would add to his stature as a poet, for there are many passages which may be read separately, out of context, without destroying any of the values which accrue to them or to Wolfe's novels as a whole.[28] J. S. Barnes has tried something of the sort in a small book, A Stone, A Leaf, A Door; but I believe it falls far short of presenting Wolfe at his best, because there seems to be little apparent system in arranging the lines, other than typographical convenience, a sbheme which was not followed at all according to Louis Untermeyer in his preface to the book. If this new rendering were accomplished, the similarities between the styles of Wolfe and Whitman would be even more apparent to anyone with a scant reading acquaintance with both men.

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28 This is not strictly true of Wolfe's last two novels, The Web and the Rock and You Can't Go Home Again, because he was attempting to be more objective and restrained in these last than in the first two. Still there are several rhapsodic passages, perhaps not as soaring as those of Look Homeward, Angel and Of Time and the River; yet Wolfe could not completely objectify his work. The absence of these poetic flights in these two novels may be ascribed, also, to the fact that the books were edited and published after Wolfe's death from the manuscript and outline which he left.

CHAPTER III

Ideological Affinities

> So, then, to every man his chance — to every man, regardless of his birth, his shining, golden opportunity — to every man the right to live, to work, to be himself, and to become whatever his manhood and his vision can combine to make him — this, seeker, is the promise of America.[1]
>
> — Thomas Wolfe

> America filling the present with greatest deeds and problems, cheerfully accepting the past, including feudalism . . . counts, as I reckon, for her justification and success, (for who, as yet, dare claim success?) almost entirely on the future . . . For our new world I consider far less important for what it has done, or what it is, than for results to come.[2]
>
> — Walt Whitman

Many ideological affinities between the works of Thomas Wolfe and Walt Whitman have been pointed out by commentators on their works: their faith in the people to do right, their hope for a more equalitarian, democratic America, their disillusionment with many social and economic facts as they found them, and their similar disillusionment with European governmental and social decadence. Since these have been discussed by Gay W. Allen, Frederick I. Carpenter, Floyd Stovall, and other scholars, they will not be treated at length in this study. Herbert J. Muller's comparison of Wolfe and Whitman will illustrate the response of more than one recent critic of Wolfe:

> The inevitable comparison is with Whitman (even though Wolfe declared he had not read him until critics pointed to their kinship). Among the first to speak of the "democratic faith," Whitman was a more spontaneous, whole-hearted poet of American

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1 You Can't Go Home Again, p. 508.

2 Specimen Days, Democratic Vistas, and Other Prose, ed. by L. Pound, pp. 261 f.

democracy than Wolfe was. Despite his often strident individualism, he had a warmer love of common men (however "abnormal" this love) and a heartier comradeliness. Likewise he was much less troubled by the disparity between the soaring poetry of the American dream and the paltry "anti-poetic" realities of everyday American life — a disparity which obsessed Wolfe to the end, and which he was never quite able to accept.[3]

While it is impossible to accept Muller's interpretation of Whitman's works and achievements without reservation, it is interesting to take note of his comparisons.

There are, however, more important resemblances between the ideas of Whitman and Wolfe which will be discussed under the general headings of pantheism and idealism.[4]

Pantheism

In his discussion of Whitman's major ideas, Allen states:

> Pantheism is almost as broad and ambiguous as mysticism, and the complexity of ideas which it embraces are /sic/ perhaps as old in human thought and experiences as mysticism. To us To use a dictionary definition, pantheism is "The doctrine that the universe, taken or conceived of as a whole, is God; the doctrine that there is no God but the combined forces and laws which are manifested in the existing universe . . . ." But this definition itself contains two almost diametrically opposed views: the first suggests a spiritual pantheism, the latter a materialistic pantheism — which some authorities deny being pantheism at all . . . . Akin to this doctrine is panpsychism, "the form of noumenal idealism which holds that the universe is a vast communion of spirits, souls of men, of animals, of plants, of earth and other planets, of the sun,

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3 Thomas Wolfe, p. 169.

4 I am indebted to Gay W. Allen and his invaluable Walt Whitman Handbook for a definition and explanation of the first term with respect to the works of Whitman; with respect to the second, I am indebted to Floyd Stovall and Frederick I. Carpenter and their studies of idealism in the works of Wolfe and Whitman.

> all embraced as different members of the soul of the world." In fact, panpsychism might be a more satisfactory term for Whitman's thought than pantheism, though at times pantheism seems more applicable to his thought than this less familiar term, and is therefore more convenient.[5]
>
> To summarize the essence of pantheism: the universe is a Divine Unity, in which separation of parts and the existence of Time and Space, good and evil, birth and death have no ultimate reality but exist only artificially in temporarily finite minds (temporary because finite minds will soon return to the infinite Unity of all mind).[6]

Applying this definition to Whitman's works, Allen says:

> At "birth" each object in nature becomes individualized momentarily, (i.e., receives its "identity" through form or "body") and represents some portion of the soul-stuff which pervades the universe. At times Whitman seems to think of the soul as a germ lying fallow, awaiting the "arising touch" to start it on its life-journey -- he is fascinated by the symbolism of traveling, because he believes in a universe in a state of constant development and amelioration: "All parts away for the progress of souls." In this procession all forms of life and people have their places and "The law of promotion and transformation cannot be eluded."[7]

This concept is akin to the Heraclitean doctrine of "flux," which B. A. G. Fuller describes as a belief that all things are a continual process, a becoming, constantly shifting from one stage of development to another.[8] Bergson, a more recent exponent of this philosophic concept, says:

> It is then right to say that what we do depends on what we are; but it is necessary to add also that we are, to a certain extent, what we do, and that we are creating ourselves continually. This creation of self by self is the more complete, the more one reasons on what he does.[9]

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5 Walt Whitman Handbook, pp. 255-256. Allen's Italics.
6 Ibid., p. 258.
7 Allen, op. cit., p. 264.
8 A History of Philosophy, Revised Edition, I, 50.
9 Creative Evolution, pp. 9-10.

With respect to this principle as illustrated in Whitman's works, Harry B. Reed has an interesting article in which he traces Whitman's "Heraclitean obsession," saying that "the most constant and pervasive quality of his poetic writings is the sense of ceaseless and indiscriminate motion."[10] Reed emphasizes that this motion is always a progressive integration, a procession of images and personalities upward from lower depths of civilization and forward to a more perfect state of existence. Allen calls this principle Whitman's "long journey" motif:

> Whitman thinks of America as merely one stage in the endless "procession," though this stage is now in Leaves of Grass his primary concern. But the "procession" idea is always an underlying motif; the word itself constantly recurs in Whitman's poems. In fact, the theme of life as a journey, and of the evolution of man and the universe as a journey, may well be called a major motif in Leaves of Grass.[11]

Interpreting Allen's definition and explanation of Whitman's pantheism, it is apparent that the doctrine of "flux" or, as Paul Elmer More calls it, "processions"[12] is the most prominent exemplification of this concept. It is granted that there are many other aspects of pantheism, but for the purposes of this study, the discussion will be limited to this one aspect.

The principle of "flux" is easily demonstrable from the works of Whitman:

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10 "The Heraclitean Obsession of Walt Whitman," The Personalist, XV (April, 1934), 125.

11 "Walt Whitman's 'Long Journey' Motif," JEGP, XXXVIII (January, 1939), 77-78.

12 Cf. Paul E. More, "Whitman," Shelburne Essays, Fourth Series, p. 203.

The impalpable sustenance of me from all things at all hours
of the day,
The simple, compact, well-join'd scheme, myself disintegrated,
every one disintegrated yet part of the scheme,
The similitudes of the past and those of the future,
The glories strung like beads on my smallest sights and hear-
ings, on the walk in the street and the passage over
the river,
The current rushing so swiftly and swimming with me far away,
The others that are to follow me, the ties between me and them,
The certainty of others, the life, love, sight, hearing of
others . . . .
It avails not, time nor place — distance avails not,
I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so
many generations hence,
Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt,
Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of the
crowd, . . .[13]

In this passage, Whitman emphasizes the flow of ideas from all things into himself where they are reformed and whence they flow out again to all humanity, or that part of humanity which will accept his teachings. In another selection, "I Sing the Body Electric," Whitman reiterates the procession theme:

The man's body is sacred and the woman's body is sacred,
No matter who it is, it is sacred — is it the meanest one in
the laborer's gang?
Is it one of the dull-faced immigrants just landed on the wharf?
Each belongs here or anywhere just as much as the well-off, just
as much as you,
Each has his or her place in the procession.

(All is a procession,
The universe is a procession with measured and perfect motion.)[14]

Amplifying his discussion of the 'long journey' motif, Allen says:

In one of those characteristic notes to himself which he
wrote during the years of his poetic gestation, Whitman

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13 Leaves of Grass, pp. 134-135.
14 Ibid., p. 83.

> says, "put this section forward . . . that this earth is under a constant process of amelioration . . . that the processes of refinement and perfection of the earth are in steps, the least part of which involves trillions of years. . ." Whitman believes in a cosmic evolution, an eternal of "becoming," never reaching perfection but always the scale of being.[15]

Another selection from Leaves of Grass shows Whitman's belief in eternal fluidity and progress:

> Victory, union, faith, identity, time,
> The indissoluble compacts, riches, mystery,
> Eternal progress, the kosmos, and the modern reports.
>
> This then is life,
> Here is what has come to the surface after so many throes and convulsions . . . .
> With firm and regular step they wend, they never stop,
> Successions of men, Americanos, a hundred millions,
> One generation playing its part and passing on,
> Another generation playing its part and passing on in its turn,
> With faces turn'd sideways or backward towards me to listen,
> With eyes retrospective towards me.[16]
>
> I am an acme of things accomplish'd, and I an encloser of things to be. . . .
> Before I was born out of my mother generations guided me,
> My embryo has never been torpid, nothing could overlay it.[17]

Allen maintains that Whitman's journey "becomes allegorical," that it signifies "life, the cosmic process, the task of the poet, or the search for the perfect 'comrade' — sometimes identified with the reader."[18]

Thus Allen develops the theme of the doctrine of "flux," as he has found it in Whitman's poetry and prose. With the explanation and the illustrations quoted from Leaves of Grass, it is apparent that such a

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15 Allen, op. cit., pp. 78-79.
16 Leaves of Grass, pp. 12-13.
17 Ibid., pp. 68-69.
18 Allen, op. cit., p. 82.

concept underlies much that Whitman wrote, particularly his forecasts of the future magnificence of the United States.

This doctrine of "flux" is also apparent in the novels of Thomas Wolfe, but it is evidenced in a different way. Wolfe himself says about his "book:"

> From the beginning — and this was one fact that in all my times of hopelessness returned to fortify my faith in my conviction — the idea, the central legend that I wished my book to express was this: The deepest search in life, it seemed to me, the thing that in one way or another was central to all living was man's search to find a father, not merely the father of his flesh, not merely the lost father of his youth, but the image of a strength and wisdom external to his need and superior to his hunger, to which the belief and power of his own life could be united.[19]

The "search motif" in Wolfe's novels may be compared with the "long journey" theme in Whitman's poems, because both involve a progression toward a goal, and because both Wolfe and Whitman used much the same means to arrive at their goals, which will be shown later in this chapter to be essentially the same. There is an apt quotation from Look Homeward, Angel which shows clearly Wolfe's obsession with "becoming" and fluidity:

> . . . he gave life, a pattern, and movement to these million sensations that Chance, the loss and gain of a moment, the turn of the head, the enormous and aimless impulsion of accident, had thrust into the blazing heat of him. His mind picked out in white living brightness these pinpoints of experience and ghostliness of all things else became more awful because of them. So many of the sensations that returned to open haunting vistas of fantasy and imagining had been caught from a whirling landscape through the windows of the train , . . .

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19 "The Story of a Novel," The Portable Thomas Wolfe, ed. by M. Geismar, p. 582. Hereafter, this volume is referred to as "The Story of a Novel."

> I am, he thought, a part of all that I have touched and that has touched me, which, having for me no existence save that which I gave to it, became other than itself by being mixed with what I was then, and is now still other wise, having fused with what I now am, which is itself a cumulation of what I have been becoming.[20]

Other illustrations of the preoccupation with movement and flow from Wolfe's works are his obsessions with trains, boats, and other means of transportation, which mark some of the greatest scenes in the novels. His second novel, K-19, dealt entirely with Eugene's trip from Old Catawba to New York; Wolfe later threw out this volume as a part of his published works, but some of what he had written -- a small part of the 250,000 words -- was later incorporated into the opening section of Of Time and the River.[21] "Faust and Helen," Book VIII of Of Time and the River, is totally concerned with the ship on which Eugene returned from Europe to America, and in the same novel are several other impassioned scenes of trains "hurtling," "blazing," "dashing," through the countrysides of America or England or France, giving Eugene (Wolfe) the opportunity to isolate small incidents in space and time and to incorporate these experiences into his novels later. The concept of flight is also apparent from some of Wolfe's chapter titles, which include, to select a few at random, "Artemidorus, Farewell," "Jason's Voyage," "The Quest of the Fair Medusa," "Young Faustus," "Orestes: Flight before Fury," and others of a similar nature, each with

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20 Pages 191-192.
21 "The Story of a Novel," p. 2.

a symbolic reference to Wolfe's quest for a "spiritual father" or, we might say, some guiding design for his life and his novels. Wolfe's metaphor of life as a river flowing through space and time demonstrates his preoccupation with this concept of "flux:"

> As I began to realize the true nature of the task I had set for myself, the image of the river began to haunt my mind. I actually felt that I had a great river thrusting for release inside of me and that I had to find a channel into which its flood-like power could pour. I knew I had to find it or I would be destroyed in the flood of my own creation, and I am sure that every artist who ever lived has had the same experience. . . .[22] my mind and memory in sleep blazed with a fiery river of unending images: the whole vast reservoirs of memory were exhumed and poured into the torrents of this fiery flood, a million things, once seen and long forgotten, were restored and blazed across my vision in this stream of light — and a million million things unseen and long imagined — the unknown faces yet more real than these I had known, the unheard voices more familiar than the voices I had heard forever, the unseen patterns, masses, shapes, and landscapes in their essence far more real than any actual or substantial fact that I had ever known — all streamed across my fevered and unresting mind the flood of their unending pageantry — and suddenly I knew it would never end.[23]

Here, there is an explicit statement of Wolfe's preoccupation with the eternal flow of life around and through him, and his purpose in his novels seems to have been to translate this experience and its limited relation to one man to universal acceptance by all men. The "procession" theme of Wolfe's novels is explicit in the beginning of Look Homeward, Angel, the second and third paragraphs of which state:

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22 Ibid., p.589.
23 Ibid., pp. 599-600.

> Each of us is all the sums he has not counted: subtract us into nakedness and night again, and you shall see begin in Crete four thousand years ago the love that ended yesterday in Texas.
>
> The seed of our destruction will blossom in the desert, the alexin of our cure grows by a mountain rock, and our lives are haunted by a Georgia slattern, because a London cutpurse went unhung. Each moment is the fruit of forty thousand years.[24]

The last paragraphs of You Can't Go Home Again echo the same thought:

> Something has spoken to me in the night, burning the tapers of the waning year; something has spoken in the night, and told me I shall die, I know not where. Saying:
>
> "To lose the earth you know, for greater knowing; to lose the life you have, for greater life; to leave the friends you loved, for greater loving; to find a land more kind than home, more large than earth ——
>
> "—Whereon the pillars of this earth are founded, toward which the conscience of the world is tending — a wind is rising, and the rivers flow."[25]

Thus it is possible to conclude that this concept of "flux" or "flow" is a dominant motif in Wolfe's novels, just as Mr. Allen says it is in Leaves of Grass. Walt Whitman was driving toward a more perfect society and government, an ideal state; Wolfe was searching for a "spiritual father" and found his answer in the hope of a more perfect society and government just as Whitman did, as will be illustrated in the next portion of this study.

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24 Page 3.
25 Page 743.

Idealism

Both Wolfe and Whitman were idealists, not in the Platonic sense, but in the same sense defined by Floyd Stovall:

> Idealism is a vague term and doubtless much abused. We speak of it in connection with politics, business, religion, and education as if it were in itself a mere abstraction. In philosophy, even, the word tends to collect adjectives such as objective, subjective, rational, and so on. But there is one thing common to all idealisms, namely, the belief that the way of life is not a blind alley, that behind universal change lies purpose, and that purpose is an expression of mind. It is sometimes hard to distinguish an idealist from a realist or even, now that impenetrable matter has been dissolved in the laboratory, from a materialist, but he has no affinity with the defeatists. He has faith in man as a spiritual creature with the power to conceive objective values, which he calls the good, the true and the beautiful, and the effective will to attain them.[26]

Frederick I. Carpenter finds that Whitman's idealism is the result of his rebellion against the traditional pattern of American life:

> For "Walt" Whitman personified, in poetry and in life, the American dream of popular democracy, in so far as that differed from, and came into conflict with, the genteel tradition of the American past, in which the young Walter had been reared.[27]

Carpenter elaborates this thesis by saying that Whitman's idealism was based on antithesis: instead of whatever was thought proper, refined or traditionally "nice," Whitman praised the opposite, the "sex poems" of the "Calamus" and the "Children of Adam" sections of Leaves of Grass being perhaps the pre-eminent examples. Whitman also made his personal life over to agree with the portrait of the "Ideal American poet"

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26 American Idealism, pp. 23-24.

27 "Walt Whitman's 'Eidolon'," College English, III (March, 1942), 540.

described in the 1855 Preface to Leaves of Grass, says Carpenter, who finds it hard sometimes to separate what was genuine in Whitman's life from that which was assumed.[28]

In an article on Wolfe, Carpenter finds that the basis of their common idealism is the same:

> Briefly, the idea which controlled Wolfe's life and writing was the American dream of freedom and democracy. And like Walt Whitman, he sang the American ideal, rather than the American actual. But like Walt Whitman also, his new democratic ideal contradicted the old aristocratic ideal, and therefore seemed to deny "idealism." "Disorderly, fleshly, sensual, eating, drinking, breeding," both he and his heroes sought to realize the equalitarian ideal in their lives and thoughts. From the orderly, genteel America of Mannerhouse and Main Street, they moved steadily toward the democratic America of their dream.
>
> Walt Whitman, like Thomas Wolfe, celebrated himself in the process of celebrating his ideal. By identifying himself with his ideal democrat, each transmuted personal autobiography into personal realism. But Thomas Wolfe went beyond Walt Whitman to dramatize the gradual development and realization of this ideal in actual life. Where Whitman had suddenly envisioned his American "eidolon," and thereafter had celebrated different aspects of it in different poems, Wolfe slowly groped toward it through the world of experience, and described the successive stages of its achievement in successive novels. Where Whitman had posed for his ideal portrait, Wolfe wrote the autobiography of the idea.[29]

Carpenter then traces the growth of Wolfe's idealism from Mannerhouse, an unproduced and unpublished play about the Civil War in the South (in which the hero's name is Eugene Gant), through the novels until the final affirmation of faith at the end of You Can't Go Home Again:

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28 Ibid., pp. 541-545.

29 "Thomas Wolfe: The Autobiography of an Idea," The University of Kansas City Review, XII (Spring, 1946), 179-180.

> The ending is obvious, and familiar. But less familiar is the fact that Wolfe had already defined the opposite ideal of slavery and privilege in his earliest serious writing, Mannerhouse. For as its name implies, this play had dramatized the conflict between the mannered gentility of the Southern conservative and the democratic idealism of the Northern liberal.[30]

Carpenter says the conflict in Wolfe's life arose from the conflict between his materialistic mother and his idealistic father, an ideological battle from which Wolfe ran in search for truth through the myriad experiences of the world. That this search was successful, Carpenter affirms:

> Therefore the ultimate evil — the "enemy" of Thomas Wolfe's American idealist — is not defeat, nor tragedy, nor death itself; but the denial of democracy and freedom. Eternal progress may be illusory, and the American dream of perfect equality impossible; but the illusion is never-the-less "true" for "Man-alive" and the dream indispensable. Emerson had celebrated "the beneficent illusions of the Universe," and Whitman had sung the "Eidolon" of democracy. At the beginning of his career, Wolfe had proclaimed his disbelief in all privilege and inequality. Now at the end he affirmed triumphantly the American ideal of freedom and equality which he had gradually realized in all his life and writing.[31]

Beside the similar origin of their idealism, which Carpenter has pointed out, there are other reasons for resemblance. For instance, both became disillusioned with Europe as a source of cultural inspiration for a future, vital America. In "Europe," Whitman condemns European monarchs, their retinues, their rising to power, and their wars which fill millions of graves with the bodies of the best young men. This particular poem ends with another paean to freedom, Whitman

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30 Ibid., p. 180.
31 Ibid., p. 187.

encouraging the people of Europe to continue to revolt against their tyrannical overlords. Again in "Song of the Broad-Axe," Whitman echoes his disgust with Europe:

> I see the European headsman,
> He stands mask'd, clothed in red, with huge legs, and strong naked arms,
> And leans on a ponderous axe.
>
> (Whom have you slaughter'd lately European headsman?
> Whose is that blood upon you so wet and sticky?)[32]

As encouragement to European revolutionaries, fighting for freedom, Whitman dedicated "To a Foil'd European Revolutionaire:"

> Courage yet, my brother or my sister!
> Keep on — Liberty is to be subserv'd whatever comes;
> That is nothing that is quell'd by one or two failures, or any number of failures,
> Or by the indifference or ingratitude of the people, or by any unfaithfulness,
> Or the show of the pushes of power, soldiers, cannon, penal statutes.[33]

Wolfe's disillusionment with Europe and the dreams he had of the old country culture contributed to his eventual discovery and cherishing of America as the home of the perfect democracy of the future. This disappointment and the condemnation of that whole group of emigre Americans who thought that Paris was the only place for good writing are most apparent in The Story of a Novel:

> The life of the great city /Paris/ fascinated me as it had always done, but also aroused all the old feelings of naked homelessness, rootlessness, and loneliness which I have always felt there. It was, and has always remained for me, at

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32 Leaves of Grass, p. 162.
33 Ibid., pp. 310-311.

> least, the most homesick city in the world; the place where I felt mostly an alien and a stranger, and certainly for me as fascinating and seductive as the city is, it has never been a good place to work . . . . I had come to Paris first six years before, a youth of twenty-four, filled with all the romantic faith and foolishness which many young men at the time felt when they saw Paris . . . . I thought it was the place where the artist was bound to find a more fortunate and happy life than he could possibly find in America. Now I had to see that this was wrong. I had come to understand very plainly that what many of us were doing in those years was not really looking for a place to work, but looking for a place where we could escape from work; that what we were really fleeing from in those years was not the Philistinism, the materialism, and ugliness in American life which we said we were fleing from, but from the necessity of grappling squarely with ourselves . . . . The place to work! Yes, the place to work was Paris; it was Spain; it was Italy and Capri and Maine, and Denver, Colorado, and Yancey County, North Carolina, and wherever it might be . . . . I had found out during these years that the way to discover one's own country was to leave it; that the way to find America was to find it in one's heart, one's memory, and one's spirit, and in a foreign land.[34]

The disgust Wolfe had for the Hitler regime in Germany, a country from which George Webber-Thomas Wolfe was expecting so much inspiration, is reflected more bitterly in You Can't Go Home Again:

> Hitlerism, he saw, was a recrudescence of an old barbarism. Its racial nonsense and cruelty, its naked worship of brute force, its suppression of truth and resort to lies and myths, its ruthless contempt for the individual, its anti-intellectual and anti-moral dogma that to one man alone belongs the right of judgment and decision, and that for all others virtue lies in blind, unquestioning obedience — each of the fundamental elements of Hitlerism was a throwback to that fierce and ancient tribalism which sent waves of hairy Teutons swooping down out of the north to destroy the vast edifice of Roman civilization. That primitive spirit of greed and lust and force had always been the true enemy of mankind.[35]

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34 Pages 576-577.
35 Page 705.

The result of idealism in Wolfe and Whitman was that they both strove for the same end, namely, the creation on this continent of a vital and vigorous democracy and the establishment of a vital and vigorous citizenry to support the ideal type of political and social government. Though vague insofar as concrete details are concerned, the broad outlines of the perfect state are clear in Democratic Vistas and You Can't Go Home Again. Whitman, moreover, says in the Preface to the 1872 Edition of Leaves of Grass:

> Our America today I consider in many respects as but indeed a vast seething mass of materials, ample, better, (worse also,) than previously known — eligible to be used to carry towards its crowning stage, and build for good the great Ideal Nationality of the future, the Nation of the Body and the Soul. . . .[36]

America's promise, it is significant to note, lies not in Whitman's present but in the future, always in the future, which is certainly a result of Whitman's adoption of the doctrine of "flux." A similar statement appears in the Preface to the 1876 Edition of Leaves of Grass:

> All the hitherto experience of The States, their first century, has been but preparation, adolescence — and that This Union is only now and henceforth (i. e., since the Secession War) to enter on its full Democratic career.[37]

In "Song of the Exposition," the same thought is found:

> After all not to create only, or found only,
> But to bring perhaps from afar what is already founded,
> To give it our own identity, average, limitless, free,
> To fill the gross the torpid bulk with vital religious fire,
> Not to repel or destroy so much as accept, fuse, rehabilitate,
> To obey as well as command, to follow more than to lead,
> These are the lessons of our New World;
> While how little the New after all, how much the Old, Old World![38]

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36 Leaves of Grass, p. 509.
37 Ibid., p. 515.
38 Ibid., p. 532.

These examples are sufficient to show that Whitman visualized a revitalized America, a country in which the ideal man would be the poet who gave all less perceptive citizens their cues for their entry into the "robust stage of democracy," each playing his part with skill and sincerity so that America could produce, eventually, the perfect state.

Wolfe, likewise, believed that the perfect state lay in the future:

> I believe that we are lost here in America, but I believe we shall be found. And this belief, which mounts now to the catharsis of knowledge and conviction, is for me — and I think for all of us — not only our hope, but America's everlasting, living dream. I think the life we have fashioned in America, and which has fashioned us — the forms we made, the cells that grew, the honeycomb that was created — was self-destructive in its nature, and must be destroyed. I think these forms are dying, and must die, just as I know that America and the people in it are deathless, undiscovered, and immortal, and must live.[39]

Later, in a passage even more reminiscent of Whitman's long-time dream of the future, Wolfe writes:

> I think the true discovery of America is before us. I think the true fulfillment of our spirit, of our people, of our mighty and immortal land, is yet to come. I think the discovery of our true democracy is still before us. And I think that all these things are certain as the morning, as inevitable as noon. I think I speak for most men living when I say that our America is Here, is Now, and beckons on before us, and that this glorious assurance is not only our living hope, but our dream to be accomplished.[40]

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39 You Can't Go Home Again, p. 741.
40 Ibid.

What a tremendous and powerful affirmation of faith in the future by one who had drunk the dregs of demoniac experience and expression, one who had sought for "the stone, the leaf, the unfound door"!

Whitman envisioned this future perfection almost before he began writing Leaves of Grass, but, as has been stated, Wolfe had to search through the whole sensual world before he could write the powerful passage above. It is reasonable, then, to conclude that they were influenced by the same stream of democratic thought which fills American literature and that they were the prophets of the new cause in America, rallying American citizens to a defense of those same ideas and ideals which may be found in the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.

Conclusion

As has been pointed out, there is a close similarity between two strong undercurrents in the works of Wolfe and Whitman: pantheism and idealism. It has been demonstrated that their obsession with the concept of flow and movement and their concepts of the future governmental and social life in this country are remarkably similar. Again, it is important to note that this study does not attempt to show any influence of Whitman upon Wolfe, but rather to point out significant and interesting comparisons.

Conclusion

> But Wolfe's work at its best is an expression of pioneering America in somewhat the same sense as Leaves of Grass. . . .[1]
>
> — Mary M. Colum

> The fact that Whitman has no imitators or "disciples". . . does not mean that his example of literary pioneering and his democratic ideas have not permeated the heart and spirit of writers like Sherwood Anderson and Thomas Wolfe, to mention only two.[2]
>
> — Gay W. Allen

This study has been concerned with three aspects of similarity between the works of Thomas Wolfe and Walt Whitman. First, there was illustrated their common subjectivity in that they distilled from their own experiences generalizations which were meant to influence the progress of America to the ideal state of perfect democracy. This theme is expressed overtly in Leaves of Grass many times and is certainly strongly implied in You Can't Go Home Again besides being stated in The Story of a Novel. Secondly, there was pointed out their similar literary technique -- their use of parallelism, reiteration, the "envelope" pattern of free verse stanza, and catalogues, in addition to the fact that a scansion applies to some of Whitman's poems by Sculley Bradley may be applied to some of Wolfe's rhapsodic prose. It must be understood that Wolfe was not consciously writing poetry, but prose, although many of the rhythmical passages exhibit

1 "Limits of Thomas Wolfe," Forum, CII (November, 1939), 227.
2 Walt Whitman Handbook, p. 537.

many of the characteristics usually associated with poetry; most of the material in Wolfe's novels, however, is strict prose. Finally, there was demonstrated that there exists several ideological affinities between the works of Wolfe and Whitman, although this study treated only idealism and the doctrine of "flux" aspect of pantheism. Many critics and literary historians have commented on various ideas in Whitman's poems and on those same ideas as they appear in Wolfe's novels; but this is, insofar as is known, the first study to attempt to relate the two from an ideological point of view. Within these three areas of comparison, the affinities between Wolfe and Whitman have been shown.

The significance of this whole study lies in the fact that the American people seem to have forgotten the messages of hope and faith in the future expressed by these two men, important landmarks in the literary history of this country. Van Wyck Brooks says:

> /At this time/. . . in Melville and Whitman, with two or three others of comparable weight, America as a whole had found its voices.[3]

Wolfe, too, was a figure out of historical context insofar as others of his contemporary writers are concerned. He was a product of the roaring twenties and the depression years of the thirties, the decades that produced Hemingway, Caldwell, Faulkner, and others who seem to be guided by a philosophy of defeatism, not optimism. Wolfe has few affinities with such writers; in general, he disagreed with their emphasis

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3 The Times of Melville and Whitman, p. 476.

upon the sordid and tragic aspects of human existence. He seems to be trying to stem the flood of pessimism with his works and attempting to turn the tide into the direction of his own hopes and dreams of the future. That the dreams of Wolfe and Whitman for this country have been largely ignored and unrealized and that we seem to be drifting even further into fear, doubt, and uncertainty about our way of life are perhaps the great tragedies of the twentieth century. Their courage and forward look are still with us in their works, and it should be the business of the American people to rediscover the meaning of Thomas Wolfe and Walt Whitman and to follow their inspired leadership, unafraid, into a future democracy, vigorous and more nearly perfect.

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VITA

William C.Doster was born in Rochelle, Georgia, on February 28, 1921. He was graduated from Cordele, Georgia, High School in 1937 and from Mercer University with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1942. He began his graduate work at the University of Florida in 1946.

This thesis was prepared under the direction of the Chairman of the candidate's Supervisory Committee and has been approved by all members of the Committee. It was submitted to the Graduate Council and was approved as partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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T. M. Simpson
Dean

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